

THE EVALUATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES QUALITY

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Abstract

Quality insurance is not simply an option, but rather a duty for organisations, being a must in the relationship with the clients, the main beneficiaries of the offer, as well as in the relationship with all those having direct or indirect interests connected to its existence and functioning. The extension of the focus from the client-centred quality to the quality for all those interested is an essential component of the philosophy of total quality management (TQM) and the starting point in the implementation of continuous improvement strategies. For the educational services this approach becomes more important if we take into account the role of education in the development of modern society. In this context, the analysis of the preoccupations of higher education institutions for a better understanding of the stakeholders' requirements regarding the quality of the performed activity and of the degree of satisfaction generated by the performance and the offer to the society becomes a fairly significant action.

Keywords: Education, Evaluation, Quality, Stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

The total quality management is the management focused on quality and oriented towards long-term success insurance by involving all the organization members, satisfying the clients and obtaining advantages for all the parties interested in their functioning, including the society on its whole.

A specific characteristic of the academic education is particularly the multitude of stakeholders types (students, employers, the community and parents, alumni, members of the education bodies, government bodies, auditors and assessors, users of research). This fact triggers the need of a high level of flexibility in order to meet the diversity of the needs and expectations shown by the categories involved. Since perpetual modifications take place at the level of all these elements and at the level of

the workforce market, a continuous research and analysis of the changes is necessary, so that the educational content is permanently adapted to the external and internal reality.

Therefore, several universities in Romania were subject to study, in order to identify the internal assessment procedures used. The current study does not intend to offer positive or negative examples, but rather a comparative analysis of the internal assessment procedures identified in the public information made available by the education bodies.

Starting from these considerations, we will identify and present hereafter several best practices used in the relationships with three stakeholder groups: students, graduates and employers. The approach should be extended as well to other groups of stakeholders (high schools, community, etc.) but the existent studies show less and irrelevant interest in this direction.

2. STAKEHOLDERS AND EDUCATION QUALITY

In the context of the permanent socio-economic changes and the high demands towards educational services, education quality is more and more connected to the needs and expectations of society (Sangeeta & Banwet, 2004). This approach towards the needs and expectations of different groups of interest (stakeholders) and/or clients implies the achievement of a set of quality standards, among which (Yorke, 1999):

- a) highlighting the benefits associated with the investment in education, both at an individual and social level;
- b) guaranteeing the credibility of diplomas issued, the quality of the graduates' training;
- c) ensuring transparency and monitoring the educational system.

Moreover, the pressure of the highly utilitarian governmental expectations on the educational systems (from an economic standpoint, the increase in education productivity is more stringently aimed at), triggers the need to increase the degree of reactivity of educational systems and the adjustment to the economic needs of society. Furthermore, the occupation of labour force having graduated from higher education institutions (graduates' employability) becomes a performance indicator for the higher education quality, forcing the educational institutions to pay increased attention to this issue.

Following the model of the industrial sector, the educational system has adopted the notion of quality as a central element for the appreciation of performance. In spite of this, quality has remained a long-debated conceptual notion, for which no consensus has been reached and which is still defined from

multiple perspectives. Due to the numerous approaches, quality has not yet been given a universally accepted definition either within higher education, remaining a debated concept on account of the perspective it is seen through, *stakeholder relative* (Harvey & Green, 1993). Given the difficulties encountered when trying to define *quality* in higher education, it becomes necessary to confine the quality evaluation criteria used by the various groups of clients and to integrate them in the strategies aiming to improve the educational process (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004). In this respect, for instance, quality represents a preoccupation of stakeholders' groups, being attractive for employers, both as „users” of graduates, and as collaborators in scientific research or training activities (Harvey & Green, 1993).

2.1. Groups of stakeholders

The diversity of groups of stakeholders and/or clients makes the identification of their needs more difficult and thus the development of mechanisms ensuring their identification in due time represents a necessity of educational institutions. Obviously, the perspectives of these distinct categories are not entirely the same, the more so as in the case of higher education institutions. We should notice though the use of two terms: *stakeholders* and *clients*.

Taking into consideration the criticisms regarding the implementation of total quality management in the educational system, the specialty literature has distinct opinions about the appropriate use of the term *client* for higher education. One of the solutions proposed to avoid these misunderstandings is to use the less used notion of „stakeholders” (interested parties). Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) identify four categories of stakeholders, which they relate to the quality approaches proposed by Harvey and Green (1993): providers, users of products, users of results, organisation personnel.

The quality of educational services is of interest for clients and other parties involved, yet it is systematically evaluated through specially designed methods and procedures by the providers of these services (educational institutions) and by external specialised bodies.

In compliance with the legal provisions, the education quality insurance is an obligation applying to all institutions part of the national higher education system. The education quality insurance is compulsory and comprises the internal evaluation, conducted by the institution itself, and the external assessment, regularly performed according to legal provisions.

In compliance with the legal provisions, the quality insurance in education is a must applying to all the national higher education institutions. The quality assessment in education is mandatory and it

comprises the internal evaluation, conducted by the institution itself and the external evaluation, regularly performed in accordance with the legal provisions.

2.2. Quality evaluation by the providers of educational services

The analysis of specialty literature and of practices in different higher education institutions highlights a wide range of methods and techniques used in the relationships with stakeholders (Osoian, Zaharie, 2009):

- questionnaire-based surveys
- scales of expectations/perception evaluation and clients' satisfaction (SERVQUAL, SERVPERF)
- the critical incidents technique
- observation studies
- focus-group discussions
- in-depth interviews

External evaluation of education quality

The external evaluation is based on the ability of higher education institutions to provide proof of the learning and research results and performances and on the check-up of their mirroring the reality, including the verification of students' activity in relation to the assumed standards.

The Romanian Agency for Quality Insurance in Higher Education (ARACIS - Romanian abbreviation) applies the principles and approaches of academic quality insurance in compliance with the legal provisions, in order to strengthen their applicative feature and to better serve the beneficiaries according to the activities run in universities and their actual requirements. To this aim, ARACIS closely cooperates with all the universities involved, with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, as well as with students' representatives, unions, professional associations and companies.

As far as education quality insurance is concerned, three fundamental fields of organisation and functioning are taken into account when an organisation already is or attempts to become a higher education provider. The criteria, standards and performance indicators are stated so that the focus should not only be on the compliance of an organisation with a predetermined or predefined set of quantitative and qualitative conditions, but also on the deliberate, voluntary and proactive involvement of that institution in order to reach performances translated into effective results.

The areas of quality insurance are the following:

1. Institutional capacity: the institution has a coherent organisation and an adequate management system, it has the necessary facilities and financial resources necessary for a stable short- and medium-term functioning as well as human resources on which one can rely in order to achieve the mission and the objectives.
2. Educational efficiency refers to the organisation of teaching, learning and research processes in terms of contents, methods and techniques, resources, selection of students and teaching and research staff, so that it obtains the learning or research outcomes clearly stated in its mission. The quality management focuses on those strategies, structures, techniques and operations helping the institution prove that it evaluates the performances of education quality insurance and improvement and it possesses information systems testifying the learning and research outcomes.

The importance of this area resides on one hand, in the focus on the management of quality insurance for all the organisation's activities and, on the other hand, in making public the information and data proving a certain quality level.

The three areas are interrelated and their use is mandatory.

3. QUALITY EVALUATION BY MEANS OF MEASURING THE STAKEHOLDERS' REQUIREMENTS AND SATISFACTION

Given the multitude of stakeholders' groups in higher education as well as the variety of their requirements, one of the methods to solve the potential differences implies the identification of the common points that may bring them together. In this respect, for each of the groups of stakeholders it is necessary to identify their perspective, which should be integrated as equitably as possible in the institutional strategy.

Another solution was to make a hierarchy of the groups of clients in relation to their importance. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) conducted a study applied on authors which had published works on this topic, requesting the hierarchy of higher education's clients. The highest importance was assigned to the students' category (1), followed by employers (2), society/state (3), institution's employees (4) and students' families (5). In our opinion, such a hierarchy has certain constraints, of which: those generated by the characteristics of the sample of the responding population (teaching staff from various fields), the impossibility to set a general classification of clients, without specifying at least a certain component/dimension of the educational system; the lack of criteria/benchmarks for hierarchy.

Therefore, we believe that the most appropriate manner to integrate the perspectives of several groups of clients is to identify their common and different aspects on the relevant elements for education quality.

Having in view all these, when implementing the total quality management the higher education systems should consider the clients' input and use it in order to improve the educational process and implicitly the final product (Osoian, Nistor, Zaharie & Flueraş, 2010). On the other hand, it would be good for any prevalently client-oriented organisation to become aware that it should not entirely depend on the expectations and needs stated by the clients, or at least not on a single group of clients (Macy, Neal & Waner, 1998).

Regardless of the existing debates about the possibility and justification of integrating the clients' requirements, their needs should be well known by the educational institutions. The expectations of groups of interest and the level of satisfaction concerning the service quality may be identified by means of the systematic analysis of their perspective, using various methods such as: focus groups, questionnaires/scales for satisfaction evaluation, in-depth interviews, observation studies, the critical incidents technique (Gilmore, 2003). An important element is the regularity of these analyses, both at labour market level and students' level who opted for another institution. The information obtained is essential for the decisions taken at institutional level.

Starting from the directions identified by the specialty literature as being definable for service quality and in order to offer a synthetic image of the factors that may influence the quality perceived by the client, we believe it is necessary to include both the clients' expectations and certain factors depending on the external context. Thus, the clients' expectations may be determined by their previous experiences, by the clients' needs (which may be implicit, explicitly present or potential), by the value that the client assigns to that respective service as well as by the advertising manner of that service on the market (the marketing-related aspects). On the other hand, the expectations and the quality level perceived may be also influenced by economic, social, cultural or institutional factors (the labour market characteristics, the training level of the workforce, values, financial resources, organisational culture, and interpersonal interactions).

Thus, we may ascertain that a specific feature of higher education is the multitude of stakeholders' types (students, employers, community and parents, alumni, members of educational institutions, governmental parties, auditors and evaluators, end-users of research) that can be classified in four big groups: education providers, educational services users, product users and the employees from the educational institutions (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). This fact implies the need for a high level of

flexibility that should meet the diversity of needs and expectations expressed by the categories involved. Since at the level of all these elements and namely at the level of labour market permanent changes take place, it is necessary to study and continuously analyze the changes, so that a permanent adjustment of the educational content to the external and internal reality should occur.

The internal dimension of the academic quality is built based on the legislation in force and according to the specific characteristics of each university, to the customs and the cultural patrimony of the academic education in our country. With this approach, quality assurance becomes a process adapted to the institutional specific characteristics and is a mechanism that always helps the academic results or performance improve.

According to the principles governing the university autonomy, the responsibility of guaranteeing procedures and instruments for assessing quality in education is held by each and every institution, as long as it complies with the national regulations.

In education quality assurance, three fundamental fields are to be mentioned when it comes to the administration and functioning of an organisation that wishes to become or already is an academic education body. The performance criteria, standards and indices are uttered in such a way so as not to stress only the meeting of a predetermined or predefined set of quantitative and qualitative conditions, but also the institution's deliberate, volunteering and proactive commitment to fulfil certain performance criteria that can be proved by means of actual results.

To identify the internal assessment instruments used to find out the requirements and fulfilment of various customer categories, the following universities have been studied: "A.I.Cuza" University of Iași, the University of Bucharest, "Babeș Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca, the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, the West University of Timișoara, University of Oradea, "Valahia" University of Târgoviște, "Vasile Goldiș" West University of Arad.

3.1. Internal assessment on the analysis of alumni's requirements and fulfilment

Due to the fact that the national education assessment standards set as a compulsory requirement that no less than of 40% of the alumni from the first three series should have a permanent employment contract on jobs corresponding to the specialty obtained at graduation, universities set their own procedures to measure the level of insertion of graduates on the employment market rather than the level of their fulfilment. Clear examples are the following types of questionnaires used by the assessed universities:

A.I.Cuza University – Alumni Questionnaire

Babes Bolyai University – Alumni’s Opinion regarding the Quality of Education

Oradea University – Alumni Registration Form

Vasile Goldis Arad University – Alumni Questionnaire

3.2. Internal assessment regarding the students’ requirements and fulfilment

This type of assessment is done using specific instruments, usually questionnaires, and aims at measuring the performance in the educational process by means of assessing the teaching staff. Considering their purpose, that is, the assessment of the teaching staff, these questionnaires identify above all the fulfilment, to the disadvantage of the requirements.

Following the requirements of the national standards for the assessment and certification of the study curricula, most universities use questionnaires for the assessment of the teaching staff or of the activity during the lectures and/or seminars. These questionnaires are also intended to assess the teacher’s activity in order to continuously improve the teaching and planning activities, as result of the students’ suggestions. The questionnaire templates used highly differ from one university to another in terms of the content, size and the obtained information. Three types of questionnaires are used:

- Questionnaires to assess the teaching activity (courses);
- Questionnaires to assess the activity during seminars and laboratory practice;
- Questionnaires to globally assess the teacher’s activity (during the lecture and seminar activities).

All the assessed universities have a Commission for quality assessment and assurance, whose purpose is to systematically survey the students’ fulfilment, to assess the quality of the teaching activities every semester, to permanently improve the content of the subjects and the structure of the education curricula, based on the feedback received from students.

To measure students’ fulfilment regarding the teaching activity (lectures and seminars), all the assessment tools used are based on three important axes:

- teaching-learning activity
- material basis
- fulfilment regarding the services and facilities they enjoy within the university

The purpose of assessing the lectures/seminars and the teaching techniques is to provide information for the teacher in order to improve the teaching process, as well as for the faculty management team, helping them make decisions regarding the teaching staff and the courses.

The analysis of the preoccupations in several universities to measure the students' requirements and satisfactions highlights several aspects:

- the focus falls more on measuring the satisfactions and less or not at all on measuring the expectations or requirements;
- when drawing the conclusions, the students' participation to the didactic activities is often taken into consideration, in order to assess the objectivity of comments;
- the items used for measuring the quality differ from one university to the other and they are not classified according to a validated model.

In short, the situation in the assessed universities is the following:

TABLE 1 – ASSESSMENT OF THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND FULFILMENT

		UAIC	UB	UBB	ASE	UO	UVTG	UVTM	UVG
Indirect assessment	Assessment of the professors	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Direct assessment	Assessment of the students' fulfilment	x		x		x			
	Assessment of the learning environment		x						x

UAIC - "Al.I.Cuza" University of Iași

UB - University of Bucharest

UBB - "Babeş Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca

ASE - Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies

UO - University of Oradea

UVTG - "Valahia" University of Târgoviște

UVTM - West University of Timișoara

UVG - "Vasile Goldiș" West University of Arad

We present in what follows a synthesis of the main evaluated components and the characteristics used to measure the students' satisfactions and to evaluate the didactic process.

TABLE 2 – ELEMENTS FOR THE INDIRECT EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES BY THE STUDENT

Evaluated components	Quality features
Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attractiveness Meeting the requirements Structure Actuality Clarity Examples, theory-practice relationship Utility Involvement level
Course development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explanation and argument Highlighting the connection with other chapters Time use Meeting the deadline Teaching methods and tools
Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Morality, integrity Stimulating the interest Empathy Treating students with respect It's a pleasure to listen to Availability to help the students, to provide advice Manner of teaching Stimulating the interest
Didactic materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Available Accessible – easy to use Diversity Bibliography – accessibility
Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modern ways of teaching Sufficient teaching facilities Capacity of classrooms Providing classrooms with furniture and other devices Microclimate– lighting, heating Tidiness
Students' evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evaluation criteria and methods have been set from the beginning and are preserved Correct, impartial evaluation

3.3. Internal assessment on the analysis of alumni's requirements and fulfilment

Due to the fact that the national education assessment standards set as a compulsory requirement that no less than of 40% of the alumni from the first three series should have a permanent employment contract on jobs corresponding to the specialty obtained at graduation, universities set their own procedures to measure the level of insertion of graduates on the employment market rather than the level of their fulfilment. Clear examples are the following types of questionnaires used by the assessed universities:

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3.4. Internal assessment on the analysis of employers' requirements and fulfilment

Taking into account the methodologies described by the publications related to this field, we identified a large number of studies approaching the perspective of employers on different levels. There are also may ongoing investigations on the international level (aiming to compare the methods and criteria of selection used by employers in different countries), on the national level (analysing the employers' requirements which should cover the total number of graduates of different educational agencies), as well as on an institutional level (ongoing investigations regarding the employers' requirements aiming to adapt the educational offer to those requirements).

Universities perform the internal assessment correlated with the employment market during certain projects on a less regular basis. Since they are not compulsory according to the education assessment standards, the determination of methods for identifying the employees' requirements and fulfilment does not represent a priority for the university management.

The following aspects shall also be considered:

- The need of further study both in the same and in related fields;
- Requirements on the development of management and the quality assurance;
- Factors impeding the need of further education (lack of time, lack of resources, family problems, poor quality of courses, etc.);

- Requirements on the organization of courses;
- More options among the educational offer.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the documents provided by the institutions, we have noticed that all universities have certain good practices for identifying the students' fulfilment level. We consider that all these procedures shall apply since this is mandatory in the authorization/accreditation process. Due to the fact that they are not compulsory, according to the national assessment standards, the interest in identifying the employees'/employers' requirements and fulfilment is rather sporadic and usually raises on the occasion of certain projects.

Conclusions on the analysis of students' requirements and fulfilment:

- between 50% and 90% of the students favourably appreciate the assessed aspects
- the most appreciated is the information regarding:
 - admission
 - specialized knowledge obtained during the course
 - the class rooms
 - access to information on the faculty
- approximately 50% of students positively appreciate students' counselling services

Conclusions on the analysis of alumni's requirements and fulfilment:

- Both the questionnaires constructs and the measuring scales are oriented towards the determination of the following elements:
- Employment percentage – how many alumni were employed after the graduation (acceptable ceiling of 70%)
- The time span between graduation and employment (max. 18 months)
- Percentage of postgraduate studies

Conclusions on the analysis of employers' requirements and fulfilment:

- If it is not a compulsory requirement, the analysis of employers' requirements and fulfilment will only be a desired element
- "Babes Bolyai" has already undertaken such a study, nevertheless it was done during a project
- "Al.I.Cuza" University has also developed a similar study, also during a project in 2000.

Conclusions on the analysis of employees' requirements and fulfilment

Due to the fact that they are not compulsory according to the education assessment standards, the determination of methods for identifying the employees' requirements and fulfilment do not represent a priority for the university management.

Once the requirements and fulfilment of the interested parties are identified, universities shall focus on developing the necessary processes in ensuring the growth of the fulfilment level. The mere recognition of the stakeholders' problems is not enough and, therefore, establishing strategies in solving them should also be considered.

We should emphasise the fact that the list of criteria is neither normative nor exhaustive. Every institution may implement additional criteria regarding the internal assessment.

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